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SUBJECT: ALTAI KRAI: PICKETS AND PLURALISM

¶1. (SBU) Summary: While Altai Krai is one of the most economically depressed regions in Russia, it has an unusually high level of civic activity and political pluralism and is home to outspoken liberal Republican Party Head Vladimir Ryzhkov. United Russia dominates, but the Communists, Agrarians, LDPR, and liberal parties like Yabloko and Union of Right Forces all have solid voter bases. Pickets by political parties and civic activists occur regularly, and grassroots movements ranging from drivers' rights groups to those protesting monetization reforms spring up quickly. The governor and regional administration do not greatly interfere in the activities of political parties, NGOs, or the media. The regional Human Rights Ombudsman and Public Chamber are active and have the support of the governor and regional Duma. Although regional television is government-run, two of the largest and most popular print and Internet media outlets are staunchly independent. End summary.

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United Russia Dominant But Not Domineering  
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¶2. (SBU) With 17300 members in the region, 75 local branches, and 48 Molodaya Gvardiya branches, United Russia (YR) is the dominant political party in the region. Although 27 out of 68 deputies (39 percent) of the Krai Sovet (regional Duma) are YR members, only 2 out of 7 committees are YR-led and the Chairman of the Krai Sovet Aleksandr Nazarchuk belongs to the Communist, Agrarian, Peoples Patriotic Union of Russia bloc "For Our Altai." Also, in the last federal elections in 2003, YR received 29.96 percent of the Altai Krai vote in comparison to 37.57 percent for Russia as a whole. YR Executive Committee Head Igor Kokinov explained this by saying that Altai Krai is a predominantly agricultural region (47 percent of the population), which tends to still vote for the Communists and Agrarians. Indeed, the Agrarian Party received 10.5 percent of the Altai Krai vote compared to 3.64 percent for Russia as a whole.

¶3. (SBU) YR's main goals are to support implementation of the national projects and to increase votes for YR in the next election. Kokinov admitted that if he did not deliver 40 percent of the vote for YR, he would likely be out of his job. He said YR actively works with 40 social organizations and tries to avoid a "platnaya" -- paid -- relationship with the press.

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Yabloko, SPS, Republican Party Small but Tenacious  
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¶4. (SBU) Yabloko, SPS, and the Republican Party all have active organizations in Altai Krai, with memberships of 1,000-2,000. However, the parties seem to be struggling from lack of funding. All three parties said their electorates were mainly from the intelligentsia and that it was getting harder to attract the youth vote. Yabloko Chairman Aleksandr Goncharenko said young people vote for who is "cool" like LDPR Chairman Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who

handed out 100 ruble bills during his 2003 campaign stop in the region. He did not foresee a merger with Yabloko, but could envision one with the Republican Party if it continued to be denied registration. He noted that a merger was the only way Altai Krai State Duma Deputy and Republican Party Head Vladimir Ryzhkov would be reelected.

15. (SBU) Ryzhkov remains a powerful figure in the region, although his prospects in the next elections are uncertain if the Republican Party is not registered. According to Kokinov, Barnaul residents increasingly appeal to YR for assistance with local problems. He contended that citizens feel Ryzhkov is more concerned with maintaining his standing on a national and international level rather than serving his local constituency. Nevertheless, Ryzhkov visits the region and frequently speaks at high-profile conferences and roundtables organized by his School of Civic Education and the former Open Russia branch (now called Open Altai).

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Just Russia Still Finding Its Legs  
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16. (SBU) PolOff met with Andrey Lyapunov and Andrey Igoshin, former regional chairmen of Rodina and Party of Life, and now deputy chairman and chairman of "Just Russia," respectively. Just Russia recently held its merger conference on December 2, and it was obvious the process of consolidating the three parties has not been easy. The tension in the room between the two former party heads was palpable and on occasion they openly disagreed with each other on party issues. According to Goncharenko, Lyapunov has reason to be resentful since he has had a long political career, while Igoshin purportedly "bought" his seat in Party of Life.

17. (SBU) Igoshin estimated that Just Russia had about 8000 members

MOSCOW 00013168 002 OF 004

in the region, with an additional 1000-1500 still to be added to the rolls. The youth organizations of the three parties were also still in the merger process. Just Russia held three public "actions" since December 2 to raise awareness of the new party and is planning another before the new year to "constructively criticize" the authorities' inability to clear the streets of snow.

18. (SBU) Lyapunov estimated that Just Russia would get 25 percent of the vote in the next elections. He said the Communist and Agrarian parties were stuck in the past and the younger generation was losing interest in them, while YR stood for the federal and regional governments which had "forgotten the people." Just Russia is positioning itself between the two blocs. It stresses social issues and will lobby for increased federal funds and investment in the region.

----- Communists, Agrarians, LDPR Strong in Altai Krai -----

19. (SBU) The Communists, Agrarians, and LDPR are strong in the region, although they are losing voters to YR and Just Russia. In the March 2004 regional elections, the For Our Altai bloc received 26.88 percent of the vote to YR's 24.43 percent. LDPR received almost 11 percent, although many interlocutors attribute that to Zhirinovskiy's last minute campaign tour of the region and the "buying" of votes.

110. (SBU) Communist Party Secretary Petr Ponarin said YR's close association with the agricultural national project has the potential to siphon votes away from the Communists and Agrarians in the next elections. However, Ponarin believed that YR is not delivering agricultural or other social welfare funds fast enough to make a large impact and the rural population will turn on YR. He said the relationship between the Communists and YR resembles that between the "reds and the whites" at the beginning of the twentieth century, i.e., between the Communists and the party in power.

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Civil Society Unusually Active  
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¶11. (U) Pickets, demonstrations, and protests occur with uncommon frequency in Altai Krai. In the past year, there have been major protests with the participation of multiple political parties over monetization, benefits for mothers with many children, drivers' rights, wage arrears, and the proposed pipeline near Lake Baikal, among others. Other smaller pickets happen on a nearly daily basis over issues like lack of snow removal and rallying for a Stalin monument in Barnaul.

¶12. (U) The hottest issue for all political parties -- from the Communists to Yabloko -- we discovered during a recent trip to Barnaul was the recent decision by Governor Aleksandr Karlin to forbid all demonstrations, except ceremonial ones like May Day, on the city's Central Square. His reasoning, which was met with widespread ridicule, was that large demonstrations caused damage to the statue of Lenin. The Communists and Union of Right Forces (SPS) jointly sued the administration (and held joint pickets) over the issue, which is now awaiting a hearing in the Supreme Court.

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Current Administration Progressive or At Least Permissive  
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¶13. (SBU) Notwithstanding the Central Square/Lenin statue controversy, party representatives that we spoke with were unanimous that Karlin was an improvement over his predecessor Mikhail Yevdokimov. Yevdokimov, a former actor called the "Siberian Schwarzenegger," had great popular support when elected, although he was not the Putin-supported candidate. According to Yabloko Chairman Goncharenko, Putin was reportedly furious that his candidate was not elected and, in part, because of this election, Putin supported a motion to have governors appointed. However, Yevdokimov was by most accounts not an effective governor and after his premature death in a car accident, Putin appointed Karlin. Karlin has managed to have a special tourist zone established in the region and Altai Krai is one of the four regions where casinos will be permitted. According to regional SPS head Vladimir Nebalzin, the governor concentrates on strategic regional issues and does not interfere greatly with civil society. The controversy over demonstrations in the square was typical of the governor, who does not always seem to give full consideration to decisions he makes.

¶14. (SBU) Altai Krai's Public Chamber, consisting of 45 members, has been in existence since May 2006. According to Head of the Public Chamber Apparatus Vladilen Volkov, the Public Chamber is attempting to play a role similar to the federal Public Chamber. Volkov termed

MOSCOW 00013168 003 OF 004

the selection process of the 45 members one of the most democratic that had taken place among the approximately 30 regional Public Chambers. The 2000 registered social organizations in the region sent 150 delegates a congress. At the congress 30 of their number were elected to the Chamber. Municipality administrations elected the remaining 15 at another congress. It was too soon to tell how much of an impact the Public Chamber will have in the region, Volkov said.

¶15. (SBU) Altai Krai's Human Rights Ombudsman Yuriy Visloguzov claimed in a conversation with us that he has both budgetary and functional autonomy. There is a separate line item in the regional budget just for his office and he has full control over how and what to spend it on. Last year his budget was USD 150,000, and for 2007 it has increased to USD 207,000. In addition, in January a Children's Rights Ombudsman will be created to oversee the pressing regional issues of education, orphanages, and poverty.

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However, City and Region Struggle Economically  
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¶16. (SBU) Despite these positive elements, it is obvious that the city and region are struggling economically. According to Co-Chairman of the Republican Party Andrey Olishevskiy, Altai Krai has the lowest per capita income in the Siberian region. Snow

removal is barely evident in Barnaul, leading to fender benders at almost every intersection. In Barnaul, political parties frequently participate in "subbotniks" (community clean-ups) at the request of the mayor. Each party has adopted a square or monument to maintain.

¶17. (SBU) The region, which was heavily dependent on agriculture and military factories during the Soviet period, has not been able to compete on the Russian or global markets due to its outdated equipment and practices. Interlocutors told us that even if there is corruption or inefficient management, the special tourist and casino zones provide the best hope for increased employment, revenues, and investment in the region.

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Some Media Staunchly Independent  
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¶18. (SBU) Although most regional television stations and newspapers in Altai Krai are either government-owned or influenced, there are at least two media outlets that claim to be staunchly independent. The Internet news site BankFax ([www.bankfax.ru](http://www.bankfax.ru)) -- one of the most frequented news sites in the Siberian region with about 200,000 visits per month -- is one of them. Headed by Valeriy Savinkov since 1993, its readers reportedly include high-ranking administration members, academics, politicians, students, and major business leaders. The site positions itself as non-partisan and has covered controversial subjects.

¶19. (SBU) There have been two attempts to shut down the site by the authorities (BankFax won both in court). In one instance, according to an interview with Vladimir Ryzhkov, authorities reacted to the site's refusal to fall in line with a campaign to discredit him during the last elections. In a second, the authorities objected to the site's publication of commentary on the Prophet Mohammed caricature scandal and charged the site according to Article 282 of the Criminal Code -- incitement of ethnic, racial, or religious hatred or enmity. According to Savinkov, there have also been inconclusive searches of BankFax's offices by the security services, for example, on the basis of an anonymous tip that they were printing counterfeit U.S. dollars on the premises. In January, the site plans to move its servers to Arizona in order to be less vulnerable to interference by Russian authorities.

¶20. (SBU) Altapress is the other regional media outlet which claims to be independent. In a professionally-done, English-language powerpoint presentation prepared by the group and given to Poloff during the December 20-22 visit, Altapress noted that it published the region's first independent newspaper in 1990 (the weekly "Svobodniy Kurs") and has grown into a 1000-person strong company since then. Currently publishing 11 newspapers and magazines with a weekly circulation of 240,000, Altapress owns its own printing presses, distribution network, and 300 sales outlets. It also prints 45 newspapers for clients from Kazakhstan, Novosibirsk, and other cities in the region. According to Altapress CEO Yuriy Purgin, the company's Internet site ([www.altapress.ru](http://www.altapress.ru)) is the second or third most frequented in the Siberian region. Altapress also inaugurated a new radio station Radio-22 on December 22, with plans to expand into television and/or Internet television.

¶21. (SBU) According to the presentation, the company is "vertically integrated purposefully to maintain its independence from authorities, political parties, and oligarchs" and "does not have

MOSCOW 00013168 004 OF 004

authorities or oligarchs among its shareholders." Purgin was particularly proud of Altapress's social projects: the School of Practical Journalism, in which Altapress managers teach 150-200 university journalism students basic ethics and professional skills, and the Newspaper in Education Project, which uses the Svobodniy Kurs newspaper in high schools to teach critical thinking and social studies by analyzing and discussing articles and current events. Director of the Moscow-based Center for Extreme Journalism Oleg Panfilov has chosen Altapress as a regional partner (in addition to Open Altai) in the Center's new program "Frontline Russia," a joint effort of Panfilov's Center, Internews Russia, and the London-based Frontline Club. The program shows journalism-related documentary

films and conducts panel discussions afterward. Topics include war photography and coverage of Islam.

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Comment  
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¶22. (SBU) Our interlocutors offered differing explanations of why Altai Krai tends to be more socially active and politically diverse than other regions. Some attributed it to the historical influence of trade unions and a strong tradition of populist Communism in the region, which has ingrained a willingness to take to the streets in citizens young and old. Most agree that the social activism is not necessarily liberal in character and has more to do with the fact that the population has achieved success with demonstrations in the past and feels confident that it will be heard by the administration, media, and political parties when it protests.

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